

Ethnic tension in Urumqi, Xinjiang spills over into riots

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Peter Main argues that ethnic riots in China are the fault of capitalist exploitation and deliberate racial discrimination by the Chinese state

The official figures say 156 dead and over 1000 seriously injured, almost all of them Han Chinese. Unofficial figures, reported before the Internet was closed down, speak of as many as 600 dead, mainly Uighurs. Either set of figures makes it clear that the riots in Urumqi were not just a passing episode of inter-communal fighting but one of the bloodiest scenes of social unrest since the Tiananmen Massacre 20 years ago.

In the short-term, and at the local level, the riots could be seen as the product of tension within a capital city that has grown rapidly in the last decade so that the indigenous, Uighur, population is now only a small, and impoverished, minority in an overwhelmingly Han city. However, purely local frictions would never lead to a death toll of hundreds, deeper forces must be at work to result in slaughter on such a scale. Equally, they would not be a reason for President Hu Jintao to cancel his attendance at the G8 meeting in Italy.

Both the population movement and the poverty of the Uighurs are products of the restoration of capitalism in China and Beijing's policy of consolidating its power over the more peripheral regions which were on the fringes of Imperial China's territories. Indeed, the sequence of events which led to the riots illustrates this very clearly.

The province of Xinjiang, China's most westerly province, has always been one of the least developed and poorest regions of the whole country. As a result, young Uighur workers from Xinjiang have been to the fore in supplying migrant labour for the booming cities of the eastern coastal provinces. The kerbside food stalls which spring up around all the big building sites advertise halal food and, thereby, the religion and ethnicity of the building workers.

Two weeks ago, in the city of Shaoguan in Guangdong province, the owner of a toy factory, hit hard by the collapse of China's export trade, recruited a shift of Xinjiang workers on lower wages than local workers would accept. In response, local unemployed workers spread a rumour that Uighurs had raped local women. This led to attacks on the Uighurs which left two dead but the attacks were filmed and posted on the Internet. It was this evidence of the killing of Uighur migrant workers that led to the initial protest demonstration in Urumqi.

The city's police, like police elsewhere, saw the demonstration as an illegitimate challenge to state authority and dispersed it violently. Only then, did the angry Uighur protesters turn against the civilian Han population, who they view as privileged colonising settlers. Clearly, such violence is misguided and almost

guaranteed to entrench divisions within the city - but of course so does privileges of one group of people and enforced population displacement of another.

How and why have the Uighurs become a minority in their own land? Why would millions of Han Chinese suddenly decide over the last decade or so to migrate to perhaps the least developed region in the country? The answer is both economic and strategic. Beneath the plains and deserts of Xinjiang there are vast reserves of oil and gas and coal, vital resources for economic development. Although Beijing and the ruling Communist Party profess to recognise the rights of "national minorities", the truth is that their ideology of the "Chinese family of nations" subordinates all minorities to the dominant Han. It is not, for example, an "Asian family of nations" it is a "Chinese" family and "Chinese" is inevitably taken to mean "Han".

Consequently, Beijing is opposed to the development of these resources being controlled by the indigenous people of the region, the Uighurs. For the Communist Party, these are Chinese resources to be used for the development of China, local development could all too easily provide the material basis for the separation of a Uighur state from China. As a result, incentives have been provided to encourage Han Chinese, many of whom have been displaced from their villages by industrial development, to migrate to Xinjiang. Within the province, these migrants now form a majority, centred in the towns, who benefit disproportionately from the new economic development.

In addition, it is through Xinjiang that a huge new pipeline, 4200 kilometres long, delivers gas from the Tarim Basin to China's industries and military protection of this strategic asset is seen by Beijing as another reason for strengthening its direct control of the province.

All this provides the wider context in which to understand the recent bloodshed. The Uighurs are clearly an oppressed people, systematically denied access to the resources of their own land, prevented from the free expression of their own cultural traditions, which are essentially Islamic, and super exploited as a reserve army of labour for China's capitalist development. For revolutionary communists, indeed for consistent democrats, all struggles against such oppression deserve unconditional support. That is, even where the methods of movements for national liberation are not those that we would use, we recognise the right of those movements to use whatever means they consider necessary to fight their oppression. The violence of the oppressed can never be equated with the violence of their oppressors.

Within China, as within all multi-national states, communists must not only demand and fight for equality in all spheres for all ethnic groups and nationalities but support the right of self-determination of oppressed nationalities, up to, and including, secession to form a separate state if that is their wish. This is the only basis for building a working class movement that can overcome such divisions and effectively fight both capitalist exploitation and state oppression.

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